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Noting that Katherine Paterson's books are loved by school children everywhere, this paper discusses her engagement with the books she writes and how children respond to them. The paper begins with a brief discussion of the inspiration of one of Katherine Paterson's fairy tales and presents an extended discussion of the motivation behind her writing "Bridge to Terabithia," which was based on events in her own life. The paper also discusses the ways in which Finian O'Shea, an elementary school teacher of sixth-grade students in Dublin, Ireland, managed to get such students to respond to literature. The paper then describes the Vermont Reading Project, a book discussion program for newly literate adults which uses children's books. (RS)

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The Lure of Story

Katherine Paterson

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Summer 1993

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The National Reading Research Center (NRRC) is funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education to conduct research on reading and reading instruction. The NRRC is operated by a consortium of the University of Georgia and the University of Maryland College Park in collaboration with researchers at several institutions nationwide.

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Some of the following essay has appeared in print previously. See particularly *Gates of Excellence* (1981), *The Spying Heart* (1989), and *Lyddie* (1991). All are by Katherine Paterson and are published by Lodestar Books-E.P. Dutton.

Foreword

Katherine Paterson delivered the following address at the National Reading Research Center Conference held in Athens, Georgia, February 12-13, 1993. In keeping with the conference theme, "Developing Engaged Readers in Home and School Communities," the conferees discussed children who are either engaged in reading or not interested in reading and described contexts that either promote or discourage engagement in reading. We considered children as motivated individuals, as members of school communities, and as members of cultural communities. And we considered what children read.

Good stories help children make sense of their world and themselves. They allow children the opportunity to find themselves, understand themselves, and love themselves, warts and all. They offer opportunities for experiencing the magic of beautifully crafted language. Teachers who love books and willingly share them with their students do so not for grammar or morals or lessons, but because children need to read wonderful books.

Katherine Paterson, noted children's book author, came to The University of Georgia to talk about her own engagement with the books she writes and to tell stories of how children respond them. Her books are loved by school children everywhere. The characters she creates are so alive and real that they become people that children feel they know. They talk with one another about whether Gilly should have gone to live with her grandmother, why Caroline got such special attention, and whether Jess should have taken May Belle over the bridge into Terabithia. Children stay engaged with these stories long after they have finished reading them.

Among the many honors Katherine Paterson has received for her books are a National Book Award for *The Master Puppeteer*, a second National Book Award and a Newbery Honor for *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, and two Newbery Awards, the first for *Bridge to Terabithia* and the second for *Jacob Have I Loved*.

Katherine Paterson also writes eloquently about children, children's books, and writing for children. Her essays, collected in *Gates of Excellence* and *The Spying Heart*, are testimony to the depth of her commitment to life and hope, children and books.

Lee Galda
National Reading Research Center
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The Lure of Story

Katherine Paterson

National Reading Research Center
Universities of Georgia and Maryland
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I went to a symposium on children and the arts in the spring of 1987 in what was then the Soviet Union. Another of the delegates was a handsome Russian illustrator named Vladimir Vagin. Vagin was well known in the Soviet Union as an illustrator of fairy tales. Neither of us could speak the other's language, but through the help of translators we got to be friends during the time we were together. As a farewell gift, he gave me an exquisite little book which he had illustrated.

Nina Ignatowicz, then an editor at Harper and Row and a fluent Russian speaker, asked me to do a book that Vagin would illustrate which could then be published in both countries. One of the aims of our symposium was to develop this kind of project.

"I'd love to, Nina, but Vagin needs a fairy tale to illustrate," I said, thinking of the book he had given me. "And I don't write fairy tales."

"Well, think about it," Nina said.

I didn't really think about it at all. I was busy finishing *Park's Quest* and I only have room in my head for one book at a time. Then Christmas came and, as usual, our house was filled with grown children and relatives. At last one morning the house cleared – John went off to work and everyone else went off to ski. You can imagine what the house looked like, so instead of cleaning up, I thought I'd take a show-

er. When I got into the shower, I was thinking only of what needed to be done to bring the house to some kind of order before the next meal; when I got out of the shower, I had a whole fairy tale in my head. Where it came from is anybody's guess. Anything to keep from cleaning the house, I suppose.

I rushed to my study and began to scribble down my story before I forgot it. Of course, it was revised both before I sent it to New York, and later after Nina had read it. But the story you read in *The King's Equal* is essentially the story as it came to me in the shower.

I've tried to analyze this. Well, I say to myself, it's because it's a fairy tale. Fairy tales are a fill-in-the-blanks sort of proposition. They begin with "Once upon a time," they end with "happily ever after," and everything in the middle happens in threes. There's nothing to it. You just take the structure and subvert it.

But why did it take me six years to write another one? I've certainly taken enough showers since Christmas 1987! Who knows? Inspiration is a mysterious phenomenon.

I'd always wanted to write fairy tales. There is in me, as I suspect there is in most of you as well, something that responds to the language of fairy tales at a deep, pre-rational level.

I'm not sure this is all good. The language of fairy tales has certainly shaped our psyches; we didn't need Bruno Bettelheim to tell us that, but perhaps we need to examine how. I think it's healthy for us women to ask if we want to teach our daughters that the meaning of a woman's life depends on the appearance of a handsome prince who with a kiss brings her to life and turns her into a princess.

My friend Kathryn Morton, in a recent letter, told me about a panel she had moderated where the panelists talked about children and literature.

"The panelists," she said, "had read their Bettelheim and supported the violence and contention we are used to in children's rhymes and stories, as though it were a necessity like salt on food. . . . Personally, I have always wondered if the nursery rhymes and the Grimm versions aren't the happenstance that we have gotten stuck with, rather than being paragons or paradigms. We are stuck with railroad tracks built to the width of the Roman roads, impractically narrow now. We are stuck with dangerous, badly designed, top-heavy yellow school buses, made new every year in the same anachronistic mold. I try to envision children

raised not on jingles about manic farmers wielding carving knives intent on mutilating mice. Instead, what would it be like if they read more rhymes as wise and salutary as *Yertle the Turtle* for instance. . . ."

Then Kathryn goes on to talk about the power of language to shape us. "What if," she asks, "what if we didn't use as the basic metaphor of group activity, sports, which are ritualized warfare, but if we used the choir as the standard metaphor for group activities. Then we wouldn't come up with idiocies like 'My country right or wrong'; we'd think: 'A good descant makes the music richer.'"

In the midst of a world torn to little pieces by racial and ethnic strife, the metaphor of the choir seems as refreshing as a drink of cool spring water.

No matter what you think of the traditional fairy tale and the effect this particular form has had on us, it is hard to argue the power of story itself. As I often say to children, life often doesn't seem to make sense, but a story has to or no one will put up with it.

I wrote *Bridge to Terabithia* not to trouble or frighten children, but in order to make sense out of a time in my life that made no sense to me. In the spring of 1974, I learned that I had cancer – an ordinary, garden variety of the disease – which was found early, operated upon, and has not in these past nearly nineteen years ever troubled me again. But at the time it didn't seem so ordinary to me. I had four young children. The thought of dying at all was frightening, but the thought of leaving my children seemed more than I could bear.

It was not that my death would leave my children alone, of course. They had a very loving father who cut down on his own constantly busy schedule to make sure he was around more and available to them more once their mother got sick. They had grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends, and a loving church congregation. The two oldest, Lin and John, had always been unusually close and they seemed to draw even closer together – sometimes prodding each other into attention-getting mischief, to be sure, but at least they were in it together. Mary, the youngest, had a wonderfully supportive kindergarten teacher who, with her daughter who was Mary's friend, did more for Mary than either duty or friendship could possibly require. And David had Lisa.

Lisa had come into our life the previous September. The small elementary school the children had attended was closed, and all the students moved

to a larger school on the other side of Takoma Park. David, our second grader, was miserable. At the little school he had been something of the first grade celebrity. Even then he was a natural mimic and very funny little fellow, as well as the class artist – famous for his hilarious illustrations.

In the new big school, he found himself in a class of strangers. When he tried to be funny, they thought he was weird; when he drew his comic pictures, they sneered. He came home in tears. He was never going back to that school again as long as he lived and there was no way I could make him. I who had gone to thirteen schools by the time I was eighteen and had been initially despised at nearly all of them was so over-identifying with my seven-year-old's unhappiness that I'm sure I exacerbated his problems.

Anyhow, we were saved that fall. One day the funny, happy little boy that I thought I'd lost forever came running in from school. "Me and Lisa Hill are making a diorama of *Little House in the Big Woods*!" he cried, beaming all over. I'd never heard of Lisa Hill until that moment. From then on I was to hear hardly any other name.

Let me read you something I wrote about their friendship back in 1975:

"I'm trying to remember," I wrote, "if it worried me that David had chosen a girl to be his best friend. I hope not, but I can't promise. At any rate, Lisa was the Liberation Movement's dream of the ideal girl. Bright, joy-filled, self-assured – the only girl to invade the second and third grade T-ball team. But sharing David's love for animals and art.

"'It's your *girl* friend, David,' his older brother would say, but David would take the phone call unperturbed. Girl friends were a classification for the ones who chased you on the playground, hoping to grab you and kiss you. Lisa was no more a "girl friend" than Rose Kennedy is a Playboy bunny.

"Lisa was the person you did everything with and told everything to. She laughed at his jokes (the ones his older brother and sister groaned over), and he laughed at hers. They played long, imaginative games in the woods behind her house, and in the late spring they both turned eight years old.

"On a bright August afternoon, the phone call came. I listened in disbelief and horror and then quickly bypassed David, reading in the living room, to search out his father. Lisa was dead. Killed by lightning on a bright summer afternoon.

"Somehow I told David and held him while he cried, knowing in my heart that those tears would be only the first stirrings of a pain that would shake his whole young being. . . .

"School began, and with it the real work of grief. Other children, uncomfortable with the unaccustomed intrusion of death, teased David. 'You're in love with a dead girl,' they'd say. And how could he deny it?

"He told me later that he tried to cut them out by pretending Lisa was still there. 'Lisa and me used to sit in the corner in music class and sing "Free to be You and Me" real loud. So I sat there and tried to hear her voice, but there wasn't anybody there. I was all alone.' He was sobbing, and so was I.

". . . 'I know why Lisa died,' he said one night after his prayers. 'It's because God hates me. Probably he's going to kill Mary next.'" (Mary is his beloved younger sister.)

David decided that God had made a list and was going to kill off everyone he loved. Indeed, his beloved third grade teacher told me afterwards that she had had a miscarriage that winter. When a substitute appeared and David learned Mrs. Beckman was in the hospital, he ran away from school and was only persuaded to return when the principal went out and found him hiding in a tree in the park nearby and promised him he'd had nothing to do with his teacher's mishap. Every time John or I left the house, the children were sure we would never return.

Needless to say, it was a terrible year for our family. I found even in writing this speech these many years later, I had trouble forcing myself to think about it. It is not a time in my life I want to go back to.

In January I went to the regular monthly meeting of the Children's Book Guild of Washington. Members took turns sitting at the head table with the guest speaker for the luncheon, and it happened to be my turn. I had never met the speaker before. She was Ann Durell, then Senior Editor for Children's Books at E. P. Dutton. In the quiet chitchat before the meal was served, one of my fellow members said to me quite innocently, "How are the children?" I opened my mouth to say the obligatory polite "Fine, thank you," and what came spewing out of my mouth was a stream of anguish. In the rational part of my mind, I knew I was behaving badly, but I couldn't help myself. The story of my child's pain simply poured out.

I couldn't stop, but finally, I ran out. There was a long silence. And

then the guest of honor from New York said gently, "I know this sounds just like an editor, but you ought to write that story."

I went home that day and thought about what Ann Durell had said. I couldn't do what I wanted to do. I wanted to bring back Lisa from the dead. I couldn't even comfort my grieving child. So I would do what I could. I would write a story that would somehow help me make sense of this senseless tragedy.

As it turned out, I didn't have any idea how to begin. I stared at the typewriter a lot. And then I said to myself what has become almost a motto of mine in the years since, "If you can't write what you want to, write what you can."

The only thing I could write initially was a sort of history of the friendship between David and Lisa, a part of which I quoted above. It's interesting, perhaps, that after I wrote that three page memoir, I totally lost it. I didn't even remember it existed. It surfaced several years after the book was published, in one of my infrequent attacks upon the stacks of paper threatening to engulf my study. My mother used to say that no literate person should ever attempt to clean house.

Anyhow, following that initial piece, I started to try to turn the experience into a story. After several false starts, I began to write a story in pencil in a used spiral notebook, so that if it came to nothing, I could pretend that I'd never been very serious about it. Gradually, I produced thirty-two smudged pages which I transferred to the typewriter. The plot thickened, the characters acquired real names, the setting became the area in Northern Virginia where I had taught school my first year out of college.

The book was moving forward, going well, until suddenly, one day I realized that when I began work the next day I would be writing the chapter in which Leslie would die.

I solved that problem. I just didn't go to work the next day. I straightened my shelves. I did the laundry. I even cleaned the kitchen. That took several days. I was reduced to scrubbing the floors on my hands and knees when a long time friend of mine asked quite casually, "How is your book going?"

She, of course, didn't know what book I was writing, nor even that no one is *ever* supposed to ask me how my work is going. But Estelle has known me since we were both in school to-

gether and tends not to be intimidated by Katherine Paterson, writer.

So I did what I had done months before at the luncheon. I blubbered out the truth. I told her the book was terrible and going nowhere. "I guess," I said, thinking I was very wise, "I guess I just can't go through Lisa's death again."

Estelle looked me straight in the eye. "I don't think it's Lisa's death you can't face, Katherine. I think it's yours."

I went home to my study and shut the door. If it were Lisa's death I couldn't face, that was one thing, but if it were my own, there was no escape. I would have to finish the book. I wrote the chapter and moved straight through to the end of the draft, the sweat pouring down my arms. And because I could not stand to have it around, I did what no professional writer would ever do: I mailed the manuscript to my editor Virginia Buckley before the sweat had evaporated.

As soon as I left the post office, I was seized with terror. What had I done? At this point in our professional relationship, I had met Virginia only once, and that formally and briefly. Yes, we'd done three books together, but that work had been done chiefly through the mails. I think I was still calling her Mrs. Buckley at the time. I know I hadn't been burdening her with the trials of my private life. What in the world was she going to make of this weird, truncated manuscript? I was sure that I had single-handedly and with devastating effectiveness guaranteed the destruction of my writing career.

I don't know how long I waited for the ax to fall. It seemed forever, but one day, probably only three hundred or so years after I had mailed the manuscript, Virginia called. "I want to talk to you about this new manuscript." "Yes." "I laughed through the first two thirds and cried through the last," she said. I nearly collapsed with relief. It was all right. She understood – as it turns out, she always does – what I was trying to do. "Now," she said, "let's turn it into a story."

I love revisions. Where else, as I have said more than once, can spilt milk be turned into ice cream? My peerless editor Virginia Buckley helped me revise by asking me questions. That, I've learned, is how great editors work. They make no attempt to take your book from you; they ask you questions to help you make it better.

"I wasn't quite sure what you meant," Virginia said. "Is this a book

about death or a book about friendship?"

Until the moment she asked the question, I had thought that *Bridge to Terabithia* was a book about death, but when she asked the question it was a moment of enlightenment. I felt almost like Buddha under the bo tree. "It's a book about friendship," I said with utter certainty. "That's what I thought," she said. "Now you need to go back and write it that way." That made sense. What the author thought the book was about would certainly shape the story. "In a friendship," Virginia said, "both friends grow and change. It occurs to me that Jess is changing in many ways. Perhaps something should occur to make Leslie change too. . . ."

And although it is almost impossible for me to believe this now, it was at this moment that Janice Avery entered the book. I cannot imagine the book without her, but I know she only came in at this point, modelled after, I must admit, Pansy, the seventh grade bully, who with her enormous pals terrorized the playground of Calvin H. Wiley School when I was a frightened, undersized fourth grader, fresh off the boat from China.

Well, anyhow, I revised the book. The initial writing, as I said earlier, had been one of the worst experiences of my life and the rewriting was one of the most glorious experiences I have ever known.

I was on such a high that I wrote to Virginia: "I know that love is blind because I've just mailed you a flawless manuscript."

My sight was soon restored. I knew perfectly well that it was not a flawless manuscript anymore than a child of mine is without sin. But I loved it almost as fiercely. I didn't think the world would. But, in a funny way, I didn't care. The book had done so much for me that I couldn't be bothered about critics or the general public. If I thought about reactions to the book at all, I thought that probably no one whose name was not Paterson would be able to understand it.

The book was fifteen years old this past September. It can be read, I think the last count made it, in twenty languages from Slovak to Chinese. I can no longer maintain that you have to be named Paterson to understand it. Among its uncounted readers are thousands upon thousands who have given my story, in the words of Robert Louis Stevenson, a "just and patient hearing" – who have, even more than that, brought to my book their own lives – joys, pains, sorrows – and the gift of

their own imaginations, and have made this book something far more wonderful than I could have ever made it alone.

Literature makes an everyday experience of this joining of the human spirit that is so rarely possible in our ordinary lives.

Helen Keller, who was both deaf and blind, had this to say about the power of literature to overcome physical barriers and human deficiencies. "Literature," Helen Keller said, "is my Utopia. Here I am not disenfranchised. No barrier of the senses shuts me out from the sweet, gracious discourse of my book friends. They talk to me without embarrassment or awkwardness."

But this kind of intimate relationship between writer and reader is only possible when the writer is willing to risk opening herself, revealing her own depths – both bright and dark – for the reader's scrutiny.

Somebody said to me once: "You're such an open person." I was startled. "You don't understand," I said. "Writers are very private people, who run around naked in public."

But a serious novel demands this nakedness. Some people think you can cheat if you're writing for children. But I don't believe you can. If you aren't brave enough to share your deepest feelings and fears and joys with the child reader, then perhaps you need to find another line of work.

But I hurry on before I am totally misunderstood. Just running around naked – just offering fresh raw insides to the reader – is not enough. For personal experience to turn into literature, something else is necessary.

The raw material which is ourselves must be shaped by time and life and skill into a story – a story that comes from deep within ourselves but is transformed into a language that other people quite different from ourselves can hear and respond to.

Someone who has become a friend of mine through the world of story is a man named Finian O'Shea. Finian has taught for about twenty years in an elementary school located in a working class district of Dublin, Ireland. A few years ago, in the school where he was teaching, the administration took a look at the truly hopeless kids – the ones who had been passed up to the sixth grade without learning anything they were asked to and who had kept every class they were assigned to in an uproar.

The administration sifted all these sixth graders out and gave them to

Finian. The dregs of the dregs – they were thought to be. None of them could or would read or write, much less add or subtract. They couldn't even sit still. "What do you want me to teach these children?" Finian asked the principal. "I don't care what you teach them," the principal answered. "Just keep them from tearing down the school."

So, released from the established Irish curriculum and with no curriculum of any sort, Finian had to figure out how to keep his sixth grade hoodlums from tearing down the building. He decided that no one, not even these children, could fail to respond to a story – if it was a good enough story. He gambled first on Margaret Mahy – a picture book, although these children were 11 and 12 years old. They were also children with extremely limited vocabularies, except in the area of obscene language, but, never mind. Finian read out loud Mahy's rollicking tale, *The Great Piratical Rumbustification.* The children loved it. Weren't they all pirates themselves? They snatched the story to their outlaw hearts.

Finian later told me that the only time he could recall ever seeing even a suggestion of smile on the face of the school's principal was the day when several of Finian's toughies came racing into the office to find him, yelling at the top of their lungs in the presence of the startled principal, "Teacher! Teacher! You got to come outside. There's a great rumbustification going on!"

So, it was a lot of Margaret Mahy and other picture books of the same quality and outrageous humor to begin with before he began easing them into longer books. The sixth grade pirates began reading and writing on their own without even realizing that Finian had put something over on them.

Still, Finian was not satisfied. Something was lacking. None of the books the class had read delved past their surface feelings. He decided to try them on *Bridge to Terabithia* – not because he was sure that they would understand it or even like it, but because it was a book he himself loved.

There were problems from the outset. Only one of these children had ever seen a cow, much less America. A crisis arose the day Sean, appointed the class agricultural expert by virtue of the week he had spent as a fresh air kid on an Irish farm, informed his classmates as to the origin of milk.

"What?" cried Bernadette, who knew all about sex, but nothing about cows. "He's lying, isn't he?" She ap-

pealed to Finian. After all, Sean was the class's most notorious liar.

"I'm afraid not," said Finian, "not this time."

"You expect me to believe they serve *that* in the lunchroom?"

"Yes," said Sean, rubbing it in. "They just put it into those little white boxes in a factory."

"I'll never drink that stuff again as long as I live," she swore. And as far as we know, she never has.

There were many times when Finian wondered if he'd made the right choice. All the other books the class had read were high humor. When, however, he talked with them about Jesse's relationship with his father, he realized that the book had struck a nerve.

In a report of his year with these children he has written: "I was asked to reread the part of the story where Mr. Aarons appeared, and the discussion quickly turned to the roles their own fathers played in their lives. Super hero status was ascribed to some fathers, the exaggeration being accepted by the group, as the desire Jesse had for his father's approval took root in some of their own lives. 'His father should have helped him be a good runner,' said Bernadette. 'But he had to leave really early to go to work,' replied Conor. 'My dad would . . . ,' he began, but could not finish the sentence. All the children knew his dad had left home, deserting his wife and children."

Later Conor wrote in his journal:

"My dad is great. I like him a lot. Sometimes we go for walks in St. Anne's Park. We bring the dog and sometimes my two younger sisters. last year my dad took me to Liverpool to see Liverpool F C. play. We went by boat. It was great. my Dad was afraid all the time that I would get lost. On the way home Dad was sick. I had to mind him. He does not like football very much but I do. He does a lot of gardening. I think he likes it when I help him. He does my homework with me sometimes. he says it's very different to what he learned in school. Sometimes we wrestle and he lets me win. I like him a lot."

Reading such passages as this about the father of Conor's dreams, Finian began to relax. He was winning them over, he told himself. They were not as tough as they pretended to be.

Then Leslie died. There was a collective gasp – silence – until someone said accusingly: "You *knew*, didn't you?"

"Knew what?" Finian asked.

"You knew all along she was going to die. You'd read it before."

He had to confess he had known.

"How dare you?" the accuser cried. "How dare you make us like someone when all along you know she was going to die?"

Finian tried to read the next chapter, but the class wouldn't let him. He had betrayed them. They hardly spoke to him for two days. He had known all along and still he'd done it to them. What kind of a teacher, what kind of a person, would do such a thing?

At last, like all children, like all of us, they couldn't stand not knowing what happened next. They sat in stony silence, but they let him finish. When he asked for reactions, they couldn't get past their anger that Leslie had died.

"Some days later," Finian has written, "some days later I finished reading Florence Parry Heide's *The Shrinking of Treehorn*, when the discussion unexpectedly returned to Jesse and Leslie. 'I was thinking about the bridge,' said Francis. 'It was the friendship between Jesse and Leslie, wasn't it?' 'It was the bridge to somewhere private,' added Carl, 'somewhere where they could be on their own and make up their games.' 'Leslie taught Jesse an awful lot,' said Sharon. 'She made him see how important it was to draw.' 'She also told him lots of stories and he would read more books,' ventured Conor. 'That was a kind of bridge, wasn't it? It took him away from all the girls to where he would be happy.'"

"The group decided that they would prefer to hear a story about 'real people' in 'real situations,' so I began to read Yoko Kawashima Watkins' *Far from the Bamboo Grove*," writes Finian. At the end of the year, much to Finian's surprise, the class voted *Bridge to Terabithia* "Best Book of the Year." They asked Finian to reread it to them in the story circle. This time as he read, there were hardly any interruptions as the children lived out their own fears, joys, and hopes through the story of Jess and Leslie.

But what happened? I asked Finian when he shared this story with me. What happened to these children. Well, he said, they came to me unable to read, write, or do math. They left me still pretty hopeless in math, but they could all read and write. They left him and went on to the Irish equivalent of junior high school where there was no Finian to protect and nurture them. Were they destroyed? I asked fearfully. Oh, no, said Finian. They had come to feel too good about

themselves. No one would ever be able to take that away from them.

Now, of course, the reason I know this story is because it was my book that Finian chose. There are other equally wonderful stories about other books and other children whose lives were changed by reading them. But I think Finian gives us the clue to how this can happen. He chose books that he himself loved. It never occurred to him that he should choose stories that would be good for his little hoodlums. None of us want stories that preach at us or give us models of upright or politically correct behavior. We love stories that help us make sense of the human condition – that help us know ourselves more completely and with greater compassion.

Since I moved to Vermont six years ago, I have been involved with adults who are, for the first time, learning how to read and write – people who have been denied the riches of the written word.

Vermont, like too many states in our country, has a large illiterate population. For the last decade, great efforts have been made to tackle this problem, with varying degrees of success. Seven or eight years ago, a couple of the tutors for adult basic education began talking about how they might do a better job, and they decided that adults who were just beginning to read needed to know the full joy of books. Their concern blossomed into the Vermont Reading Project. This is a book discussion program for newly literate adults, using children's books.

This is the way it works: A series of discussions is set up on a single theme – home – friendship – courage – history. It will run for three months, meeting once a month, usually in a public library. Adult students are invited to attend with their tutors. Each night three books will be discussed which relate to the theme. One is a picture book, one, in the beginning reader category, and the third, a novel. The idea was that the students would be given all three books, and then they could choose a book on their own level and still be able to enter into the discussion of the theme. The idea broke down, however, when it became apparent that every student was determined to read all three books. The students who could not handle the novel, simply bullied their tutors into reading it aloud or helping them get through it word by laborious word.

One of these students has been reading my novel *Lyddie* for a year now. As difficult as it is for him, he has told his tutor that he is determined to

read it to the end. He *has* to know if Lyddie will marry Luke. His tutor and I are both *very* nervous.

In 1989 new literates in Rutland had a wonderful idea. Through book discussion, they had come to love books. "Let's have a celebration," they said. "Let's invite the students from the discussion groups all over the state, choose a book that everyone will read, and discuss it."

The book they chose was *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, and because the author just happened to live in the state and Barbara Bush wasn't available, they asked me to speak at the celebration.

The Vermont Council on the Humanities, IBM, and, of course, that company that always helps, Ben and Jerry's, were enlisted to provide money for the event. The owner of a ski resort motel offered his beautiful facilities. But would anyone come?

More than three hundred students and tutors did, from all over the state, even though for many it meant missing a day's wages, taking a bus at dawn to meet with strangers, and, not incidentally, revealing to 300 other people that they had just learned to read.

When the invitation to speak was passed on to me by Sally Anderson, the state director of the Reading Project, she said: "Um, Katherine, I think I'd better warn you. Most of these people have never heard a formal speech in their lives. They don't have any listening skills."

"I think you're saying I shouldn't write out the speech the way I always do."

"I'm afraid so," she said.

A librarian friend drove me to the Cortina Inn near Rutland, over the mountains, along curving back roads by the river. I am not given to motion sickness, but, believe me, I was near death from fright. And it was not Grace's driving. An hour and a half to fill and no prepared manuscript. I don't memorize well any more. My grey cells have blanched out. I alternated, during that long early morning drive, between nervous giggles and intense if silent prayer. "Oh God, please let me get through this speech without making a fool of myself!"

Now I have not in my long, Presbyterian life had many experiences when I could truly say that I thought I heard the voice of God. But I seemed to that morning. And God said: "Shut up. This is not your day."

And when I shut up and forgot about my fear, I had one of the most amazing days of my life. It was an audience a politician would die for. They hung on every syllable. They

laughed at every joke. If I asked a rhetorical question, someone was sure to answer. The leaders had to bully us to a stop at the end of the hour and a half while the audience was still giving their testimonies to the power of books to challenge and to heal. These people gave me themselves because they had read Gilly's story and they identified with her hurt and anger. They loved her, and by extension they loved me because I had somehow given her to them.

I went home and turned back to the story I was trying to write, set in Vermont of the 19th century, and, of course, my growing friendship with adults just coming into the joy of reading was very much on my mind. Lyddie, like many of my new friends, had to take on the responsibilities of adulthood when still a child. She, like they, had to struggle against terrible odds and, despite her lack of schooling, determined to read for herself a book a friend had read aloud to her and that she had loved.

Still, even as I wrote the book, I felt sad that it was too difficult. It would be inaccessible to the very people who had inspired much of its writing. But I believe strongly that a book teaches you how it ought to be written, and I was trying to obey the dictates of this particular story. I would wreck it if I tried to tailor it to fit a particular audience.

As it turned out I was wrong about the inaccessibility of *Lyddie*. In the fall of 1991 when we held the third annual Celebration of People and Books, *Lyddie* was one of five books relating to Vermont history that participants might choose to read and discuss. In honor of Vermont's Bicentennial, the Shelburne Museum (which is our answer to Williamsburg) provided elegantly written and printed study guides to each book, relating the contents of the books to what participants would see as they toured the various buildings and exhibits on the Shelburne grounds. More than five hundred people came and of those, more than 100 new readers chose to read and discuss *Lyddie*.

One of the participants has said I might share some of her reflections on the celebration.

"My teacher is the one who encouraged me to read *Lyddie*, and I'm glad that she did. . . . Lyddie is a lot like me because I don't know how to read very well, and Lyddie had a hard time, too. But Lyddie is more like I would like to be. . . . I really did have such a wonderful time that day at the Shelburne Museum. The museum brought *Lyddie*

to life. . . . I want to thank you for spending the day with us and writing and autographing such a wonderful book. I really had a great day. I can't remember when I had such a wonderful day. I didn't want the day to end."

"The next day in the mill, the noise was just as jarring and her feet in Triphena's old boots swelled just as large, but now and again she caught herself humming. Why am I suddenly happy? What wonderful thing is about to happen to me? And then she remembered. Tonight after supper, Betsy would read to her again. She was, of course, afraid for Oliver, who was all mixed up in her mind with Charlie. But there was a delicious anticipation, like molded sugar on her tongue. She had to know what would happen to him, how his story would unfold.

"Diana noticed the change. 'You're settling in faster than I thought,' she said. But Lyddie didn't tell her. She didn't quite know how to explain to anyone, that it wasn't so much that she had gotten used to the mill, but she had found a way to escape its grasp. The pasted sheets of poetry or Scripture in the window frames, the geraniums on the sill, those must be some other girl's way, she decided. But hers was a story."

That is our work, isn't it – yours and mine? To give stories – to provide the nourishment and healing and joy of books – the full power and glory of language – to those of whatever age who need literature for the spirit as they need food and drink and shelter for the body. There are difficulties in the work each of us has chosen, and I certainly do not minimize the tough challenge each of you faces every day. But, unlike many people in this world, once upon a time you and I received the gift of language, spoken and written, the language of the present and the language of the ages – a treasure beyond measure. And beyond that, you and I are allowed every day to share that treasure with others. Maybe we're not living a fairy tale – but it's certainly a glorious adventure. I'm glad we're in it together.

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